

MATOS (NUMBERS 30:2-36:13)

The Silverware Garden

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

One of the more common misconceptions in Kosher Law that I come across is the notion that I like to call “the Silverware Garden.” I can’t tell you how many people have told me that they recall in their youth observing their mothers or grandmothers taking spoons, forks, and knives that had become non-Kosher and sticking them in the ground for a few days to make them Kosher. There appears to be some mystical power of the earth to draw the non-Kosher status out of the utensils. The truth is that this practice demonstrates a total misunderstanding of the process of Koshering vessels.

The Israelite army returned victorious from war against the Midianites. There were, among the spoils of war, food utensils that the Israelites were interested in using in their own homes. Two issues needed to be addressed. Any utensil that had absorbed non-Kosher food needed to have the residual taste of that food removed. In addition, all utensils, Kosher or not, had to be purified by immersion in a Mikveh, ritual bath.

Elazar the Priest said to the soldiers who came to the battle, “This is the rule that G-d commanded Moses: Gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, and lead; whatever was used over fire must be passed through fire and purged . . . That which did not go through fire need only be passed through water . . . ” (Numbers, 21-23)

****[PLEASE NOTE: THE**LAWSOF KOSHERINGANDIMMERSING VESSELSAREVERY COMPLEX. I AM GIVING A VERY BRIEF OVERVIEW. IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO ACT UPON THESELAWSWITHOUT A MORE THOROUGH DISCUSSION WITH AN EXPERT IN KOSHER LAW.]*****

For simplicity’s sake, we’ll discuss the second law first. Metal food utensils such as pots, pans, spatulas, and silverware must be immersed in a Mikveh prior to use. (They could also be immersed in an ocean or certain other bodies of water.) By rabbinic extension, the same rule applies to glass utensils. Plastic and stoneware are exempt. Many houseware stores in Jewish communities provide a Mikveh on the premises so customers can immerse their purchases before bringing them home.

This assumes that the utensil is brand new, never having been used. However, if, for example, a Jew purchases a non-kosher restaurant, he must kosher the utensils before he immerses them.

The first step of the Koshering process is making sure that there is no food, grease, grime, or any other substance on the utensil. Koshering removes TASTE absorbed in the pores of the metal. First you have to get rid of the dirt.

The basic idea behind Koshering food utensils is the assumption that the utensils, even if they are clean, have absorbed minor traces of non-Kosher flavor into the pores of the utensil. There is nothing mystical here. The rule of thumb is that “the manner in which it is absorbed is the manner in which it is expelled.” The stronger the intensity of the absorption is, the more intense the cleaning process must be.

Heat is a major factor in the intensity of flavor absorption. The greater the heat, the greater the absorption; the weaker the heat, the weaker the absorption.

* If, for example, cold milk is accidentally spilled into a cold meat pot, the pot needs to be thoroughly rinsed out with COLD water. (In fact, the use of hot water might only make matters worse!)

* If hot food makes contact with a cold surface, (e.g., chicken soup spills onto a metal dairy counter) once it is cleaned off, you pour boiling water over the surface.

* If a non-kosher flavor is COOKED into the utensil, (e.g., a dairy spoon falling into a pot of chicken soup) the utensil is placed into a pot of boiling water.

* If the non-Kosher flavor was cooked into the vessel without water, (e.g., a barbeque rack) it must be heated to a very high temperature until it glows. (Placing it into a self-cleaning oven is sufficient.)

(Note that the verse quoted above lists only metals. Some materials, such as china and porcelain, cannot be Koshered. Plastic is questionable. According to SOME opinions, glass, due to its nonporous nature, doesn't need to be koshered at all.)

So where does the spoon-in-the-garden fit in?

If you cut a sharp food like an onion or garlic with a dairy knife, that onion is now considered dairy; it should not be eaten with meat. If you subsequently cut the same onion with a meat knife, the knife needs to be Koshered.

How should you Kosher it? On the one hand, it wasn't cooked, so it shouldn't require boiling or glowing. On the other hand, the pressure of the knife cutting into the pungent onion has imparted a certain degree of dairy absorption into the meat knife.

“The manner in which it is absorbed is the manner in which it is expelled.” The way to Kosher a knife that has absorbed non-Kosher flavor through cutting pressure is to remove it via cutting pressure. You go into your back yard and force the knife into hard dirt ten times. The repeated pressure of the knife being pushed into the ground will clean away any remnants of non-Kosher taste. (Scraping the knife with steel wool would accomplish the same thing.)

After stabbing your back yard several times, you may immediately return your knife to Kosher service. (It would be a good idea to wash off the dirt first!)

So what about that spoon Grandma planted in the garden for a week or so? What did that accomplish?

Nothing. Another Jewish old wives’ tale bites the dust . . . um . . . dirt!

More details on the Koshering process can be found [here](#). For details on immersing utensils, click [here](#).

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2005 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.